Cyborg or Goddess? Religion and Posthumanism From Secular to Postsecular[1]

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Abstract

This article works on the premise that critical posthumanism both exposes and calls into question the criteria by which Western modernity has defined the boundaries between nature, humanity, and technology. Yet the religious, cultural and epistemological developments of what is known as the 'postsecular' may signal a further blurring of another set of distinctions characteristic of modernity: between sacred and secular, belief and non-belief. Using Donna Haraway's famous assertion that she would 'rather be a cyborg than a goddess', I consider whether critical posthumanism's valorisation of cyborg identities is also capable of negotiating this 'final frontier' between immanence and transcendence, secular and sacred, humanity and divinity. In essence: is there space for a religious dimension to visions of the posthuman?

Keywords: *Cyborg; Donna Haraway; Posthumanism; Postsecular; Religion*

From human to post-human

Contemporary technoscientific advances have blurred the distinctions between humans and animals, humans and machines, nature from culture, artificial from organic, by which Western modernity constructed its definition of normative and exemplary humanity. The 'ontological hygiene' (Graham, 2002) by which the humanist subject was defined in binary opposition terms to its others (machines, animals, subaltern cultures – the 'inhuman') has been breached.

For cultural theorist Donna Haraway, the cyborg (cybernetic organism, a hybrid mixture of the technological and the biological) deconstructs the dualism of human agent and inert tool, and demonstrates the extent to which late twentieth century and early twenty-first century Western life is complicit with advanced technologies. Effectively, it is impossible to speak of 'being human' without recognising our dependence on machines, and increasingly it is difficult to draw definitive boundaries between species. It represents an acknowledgement that 'humanism' as a category was always about 'naturalizing' a construction, about suppressing the 'inhuman' within. 'Being human' has never come naturally!

> It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices. In so far as we know ourselves in both formal discourse (for example, biology) and in daily practice (for example the homework economy in the

integrated circuit), we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras. Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no formal, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic (Haraway, 1991, 177-178).

Haraway argues, however, that this is something to be celebrated rather than feared. The figure of the cyborg can serve as the standard-bearer of new ontologies that liberate us to define ourselves not in terms of purity and exclusion, but states of multiplicity, hybridity and fluidity of being which affirm our affinity with non-human animals, the Earth, our tools, artefacts and built environments. Both materially and symbolically, the cyborg embodies ambivalence: at once the creation of the military-industrial drive to conquer outer space and a figure who defies conventional categorizations of Oedipal origins, gender and 'race'.

Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally-designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert (Haraway, 1991, 152).

Similarly, as 'a condensed image of both imagination and material reality' (Haraway, 1991, 150) the cyborg straddles the worlds of science fiction and the corporate robotics industry. It is both a 'thing' and a 'thing to think with'. This resonates with the way in which mid-twentieth century science fiction and scientific research and development (in its commercial and state-sponsored forms) enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, as fictional representations of medical technologies and the race for space fuelled popular expectations about the potential of scientific advances; and in turn, as public hopes and anxieties were refracted through forms of mass entertainment that held up a (refracted) mirror to actual technological advances (Graham, 2002).

Haraway's advocacy of the figure of the cyborg has been hugely influential across a range of disciplines considering the impact of advanced technologies on culture and society, including feminist theory, cultural studies and philosophy of technology. In its defiance of fixed organic essences, the cyborg represents the transgression of species and category boundaries (human/machine, nature/culture, biological/cybernetic) thereby becoming the symbol for the rejection of race, gender or species essentialism, or any totalizing identity. It is a '*myth* about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities' (Haraway, 1991, 154). As a hybrid, fluid pastiche of parts, the cyborg embodies 'the promises of monsters' (Haraway, 2004b, 63-124) and represents a call to find liberation in identities that are hybrid, fluid and inter-connected. Released from the illusion of ontological purity, the cyborg can enable humanity to think beyond the confines of patriarchal humanism to a world where identity is creatively defined in terms of boundaries rather than essences.

Cyborg or goddess?

In her most celebrated exploration of cyborg identities, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*, Haraway also famously declared, 'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess,' (1991, 181) and this has been a matter of debate and analysis ever since (Lykke, 1997; Mantin, 2019; Midson, 2018; Thweatt-Bates, 2012). In the context of an essay that celebrates augmented bodies, hybrid identities and complex affinities, and which has been a foundational text for the discipline known as

critical posthumanism, how are we to 'read' Haraway's statement endorsing what appears to be a form of dualism? Does this statement represent a rejection of a particular kind of metaphysical and religious thinking that associates divinity with an immutable, dispassionate deity in whose image humanity yearns for disembodied 'transcendence'? Or the repudiation of a traditional, matriarchal imagined past in favour of a futuristic anthropology of technologized hybridity?

In some respects, Haraway may be seen as expressing a preference for technology over theology (or even theology, its feminist equivalent), and echoing modernity's eclipse of religion, spirituality and the sacred in favour of a cultural imaginary that is scientific, rational-technical and therefore secular. Certainly, there is a strong affinity between modern technoscience and a broadly secular, rationalist perspective in which religion and science, belief and scepticism, theism and atheism are regarded as incompatible opposites. Haraway's dichotomy makes some sense within the prevailing secular and materialist emphasis of contemporary science and technology studies and feminist theory, which regards adoption of advanced technologies and celebration of human affinity with nature and technology as diametrically opposed to an imagined religious world-view of fixed essences and a hierarchy of body/spirit. It also represents a rejection of essentialized, 'god-given' limitations on human potential. There is an assumption, therefore, that posthumanism, both in its critical and transhumanist varieties, will be far removed from the concerns of religion.

Nevertheless, there are also significant ways in which religion continues to feature within discourses and representations of posthumanism. This reflects the emergence of what some would call a 'postsecular' culture, in which new and enduring forms of religiosity co-exist with enduring secular and atheist world-views (Habermas, 2008; Graham, 2013; Taylor, 2007). Within a postsecular paradigm, it might be possible to regard religion as *both* inimical to scientific progress and human advancement *and* as the source of ancient wisdom that continues to inform understandings of what it means to be human – and by extension, posthuman.

To read the cyborg and the goddess through such an alternative, postsecular lens, then, is to be invited to reintroduce the sacred into contemporary social theory. In defiance of the trajectories of secularization and the mind-set of secularism, therefore, we find ourselves transgressing not only the ontological boundaries of humanity, nature and technology but crossing the 'final frontier' (Graham, 2015) between religion and the sacred. It is a matter, initially, of thinking 'genealogically' (Asad, 2003) about the way both posthuman and postsecular have their origins in the critique of the assumptions that shaped Western modernity. These were to do with the elevation of the human subject as autonomous and self-determining, distinguished from animals, nature and machines; and also, uniquely rational and unconstrained by the bounds of superstition, tradition and religion.

The secular cyborg

Certainly, one variety of posthumanism, the philosophy of transhumanism, could be regarded as the epitome of a thoroughly expansive embrace of technology that is unambiguously at the service of the ambitions of modern, Western humanist philosophy. Transhumanism is premised on an embrace of radical Enlightenment humanism, in which new technologies continue to facilitate the continued evolution of the human species whose abiding characteristic rests in its inventive, rational instinct for invention and self-improvement

(Bostrom, 2005).[3] According to this vision, human enhancement does not threaten true personhood, on the basis that it is actually an extension of humanity's 'essential' qualities of rationality, autonomy and self-improvement (Thweatt-Bates, 2012, 9). Transhumanism 'directly challenges the notion of the immutability, givenness, or sacredness of these biological limitations,' (Thweatt-Bates, 2012, 10) and positions *natural* and *technological* as diametrically opposed concepts. The latter serves as the solution to the problems of finitude, entropy and risk that arise from the former. As a 'standing reserve', nature is an entirely legitimate object of human scrutiny and manipulation; and 'transcendence' of culture over nature is an expression of the ontological and moral distance between humanity and other species. Yet as I shall argue, even within this expansive embrace of technologized humanity there is space for religion.

By contrast, an alternative strand known as critical posthumanism (Badmington, 2000; Herbrechter, 2013) positions itself in relation to an understanding of human ontology that is altogether more contested. It denotes 'a general critical space' in which the 'stability of the categories 'human' and 'nonhuman' can be called into question' (Waldby, 2000, 43). If posthumanism is humanity imagined 'outside the narratives of humanism' (Haraway, 2004a, 49) then this is because the genetic and ecological continuum of human and non-human nature, the malleability of genetic and digital technologies, the ubiquity of virtual and computer-mediated communications and their accompanying influence on our altered experiences of space, place, community and embodiment mean that 'matter is not dialectically opposed to culture, nor to technological mediation.' (Braidotti, 2013, 35) In other words, the biological and the technological, the material (or 'real') and the virtual are co-existent and co-evolving. The inability to disentangle everyday life from its (inter)dependence upon or with advanced technologies renders the classical humanist subject obsolete.

> Posthuman has become a way of naming the unknown, possible, (perhaps) future, altered identity of human beings, as we incorporate various technologies into our human bodies and selves. It therefore functions as an umbrella term, covering a span of related concepts: genetically enhanced persons, artificial persons or androids, uploaded consciousnesses, cyborgs and chimeras (mechanical or genetic hybrids). Thus, the posthuman is not any one particular thing; it is an act of projection, of speculation about who we are as human beings, and who we might become (Thweatt-Bates, 2012, 1).

Thus, talk of the posthuman is a way of tracing the processes by which we have differentiated organic from inorganic, nature from artefact, human from non-human. To ascribe the prefix 'post'[4] is to highlight that these categories are constructions or artefacts, and to recognize the porosity of the boundaries between the human, non-human and 'otherwise human' (Braidotti, 2013, 196). The posthuman represents a refusal to fix or reify human nature or essence independent of an account of humanity's co-evolution with its environments, tools, and artefacts.

In speaking about the ascendancy of modern humanism, Bruno Latour has argued that it was premised on 'the simultaneous birth of 'nonhumanity' – things, or objects, or beasts – *and* the equally strange beginning of a *crossed-out God*, relegated to the sidelines.' (Latour, 1993, 13, my

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[3] For a critical perspective on humanism and technology, see Edis, 2016.
[4] Or to render it 'post/human': see Graham, 2002 and Badmington, 2004.

emphasis). Latour's reference to theology gestures towards another constituent in the emergence of modernity: the birth of a discrete philosophy, or sphere of life, known as the 'secular'. The creation of an immutable, autonomous, self-actualizing humanity was as dependent on the suppression of the transcendent, the divine non-human, as it was on the creation of a binary opposition between the normatively human and its 'others' in nature, the animal kingdom or in the world of tools, technologies and machines. Yet if an investigation into the genealogy of humanism reveals its roots in the establishment of certain material and discursive boundaries associated with the birth of Western modernity, then we are led inevitably to another set of ontological and epistemological fault-lines: those which demarcate secularity from religion, matter from metaphysics, reason from superstition.

Beyond secularity

Jürgen Habermas' work has been closely associated with the 'postsecular' turn in social theory and political philosophy, initially as a way of accounting for the resurgence of religion as a political force in global civil society at the end of the twentieth century (Habermas, 2008, 2010). Despite the predictions of secularization theory, religion has not vanished from the public domain. This is apparent not only in the global resurgence of religiously-motivated activism, in Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism, but also in the persistence of heterodox forms of personal spirituality—including those who identify themselves as 'Spiritual but not Religious' (Fuller, 2001; Hjelm, 2015) or in the renewed interest in forms of theological and Biblical scholarship among contemporary philosophers (Badiou, 2003; Eagleton, 2014; Žižek, 2003).

Part of the complexity of the postsecular, however, is that it does not necessarily attempt to deny the functionally secular nature of much of Western society. Despite the 'new visibility' of religion over the past thirty years, none of this represents a reversal of secularization and certainly not a reversion to pre-modern or theocratic paradigms of medicine, politics, gender roles, cosmology and so on. The decline in the cultural influence of and formal affiliation to organized religion is undeniable, and in public life there is continued and vigorous resistance to admitting any legitimacy for religion within the realms of politics, law, education, and morality. The postsecular is, therefore, more an acknowledgement of the 'simultaneous… decline, mutation and resurgence' (Graham, 2013, 9) of religious believing and belonging.

The postsecular is positioned, then, at the interface of the renewed or continuing presence of religion, spirituality and the sacred, and the political settlements and epistemological legacies of secularism, materialism, and humanism. Just as the postsecular describes a situation in which modernity and postmodernity, secular and religious co-exist as overlapping and conflicting paradigms, however, we can perhaps begin to see how religion and the sacred have never been entirely absent from versions of the *posthuman*, either.

Alongside the discourse of humanist and transhumanist self-actualization, there has always been evidence of an attitude to technologies as the realization of (particular kinds of) metaphysical and spiritual endeavours. Writers such as David Noble (1997) and Margaret Wertheim (1999) began to highlight the parallels between humanity's technological endeavours and a kind of demiurgical instinct—to become gods, to ascend to the heavens, to abandon the 'meat' of human embodiment in order to attain a virtual, immortal existence— from the late 1990s onwards. Similarly, Erik Davis has argued that a supposedly post-religious modernity has not succeeded in eliminating 'occult dreamings, spiritual transformations, and

apocalyptic visions' (1998, 2). Instead, they 'went underground, worming their way into the cultural, psychological, and mythological motivations that form the foundations of the modern world.' (1998, 3) Advanced technologies appear invested with a quasi-magical and mystical power, which 'embodies an image of the soul, or rather a host of images: redemptive, demonic, magical, transcendent, hypnotic, alive.' (1998, 9)

Paradoxically, then, manifestations of religion continue to appear in contemporary discussions of the post-human. The appropriation of advanced technologies is regarded as a magical and sacred act, capable of inducting humanity into sacred spaces and conditions; the quest for human enhancement (and often, immortality) is seen as an extension of humanity's quasi-divine powers; and representations of posthuman figures often emphasise their holy, shamanistic, or redemptive qualities (Cowan, 2010; Graham, 2002; McAvan, 2012). While such sentiments may appear to contradict modernist depictions of religion and technology as antipathetic, they actually rest on an assumption that humanity's technological inventiveness is an outworking rather than a denial of a spiritual instinct to transcend the physical and temporal world and to assume god-like powers of omniscience and immortality:

> [T]he freeing of our thinking from the severe limitations of its biological form may be regarded as an essentially spiritual quest … [E]volution moves toward greater complexity, greater elegance, greater knowledge, greater intelligence, greater beauty, greater creativity, greater love. And God has been called all these things, only without any limitations [….] Evolution does not achieve an infinite level, but as it explodes exponentially it certainly moves in this direction […] (Kurzweil, 2005, 389).

Similarly, movements such as transhumanism foresee a world in which digital, cybernetic, genetic and biomedical technologies become the instruments of the next phase of human evolution, whereby *homo sapiens* will mutate into *homo cyberneticus* or *techno sapiens* (Jackelen, 2002). This sketches a clear analogy between technologically-facilitated enhancement of human limitation and the assumption of superhuman, god-like powers, to the extent that some writers have argued that transhumanism is a New Religious Movement, complete with charismatic leaders, sacred texts and carefully-delineated eschatology of human perfectibility and *theosis* (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2012). Clearly, then, even in a supposedly secular age, expressions of religion continue to fuel our technological ambitions and our visions of the ends to which advanced technologies might transport us.

The 'postsecular' posthuman

We return, therefore, to Donna Haraway, to discover whether it is possible to make a postsecular reading of her preference for cyborgs over the goddess. It encourages us to look for the ways in which the after-life of traditional religion and its mutations function within Haraway's work. We discover how she embodies some of the contradictions and complexities of the postsecular, not least by describing herself as anti-Catholic while drawing on vivid Christian symbolism (Goodeve, 2000, 13). For example, in her playful allusions to the Genesis creation and Fall narratives in *Manifesto*, the vision of cyborg posthumanity is not one of nostalgia for fixed essences, a loss of innocence 'about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness' (Haraway, 1991, 175), but about the formation of an inclusive, ethical, planetary coalition of species at ease with their own ontological ambivalence. The cyborg is Haraway's 'ironic faith, my blasphemy' (1991, 149) inviting heretical thought-experiments beyond the heterodoxies of patriarchy and industrial-capitalism. Similarly, in another essay,

OncoMouse™, a genetically modified laboratory mouse transplanted with an oncogene for the purposes of breast cancer research, assumes a Christlike redemptive significance, complete with crown of thorns and allusions to the Biblical motif of the suffering servant (Haraway, 1997, 46-47, 78-85).[5]

In that respect, Haraway's 'Catholic sacramentalism' (Goodeve, 2000, 24) or 'sacramental materiality' (Thweatt-Bates, 2012, 83) as a strategy of resistance to dualism is significant. 'Haraway's resistance to the separation of the material and the semiotic can be seen as the philosophical result of a sacramentalism that accepts the material instantiation of the symbolic and sacred.' (Thweatt-Bates, 2012, 82) In the sacrament, the sacred suffuses the material which is the means, or medium, and sign of divine grace. It serves to re-unite matter and spirit, nature and agency, transcendence and incarnation. The boundaries of material and metaphysical, sacred and secular, are themselves dissolved. Divinity re-enchants the material, technological world, as well as natural/non-human ecologies and environments by means of a 'radical immanence and raw cosmic power' (Mantin, 2019, 19) that dissolves the (false) dichotomies of secular modernity.

Rosi Braidotti has also considered the implications of postsecularity for feminist politics, concluding that a healing of the secularist fissure between regressive religion and progressive secular humanism allows for recognition of the agency of women of religion (Braidotti, 2008). Braidotti's 'nomadic subject' may also be seen as analogous to Haraway's cyborg as one who shatters the illusion of the undifferentiated, decontextualized, essential self, free of encumbrances of physical body, race, affect. For Braidotti, the posthuman is not about aspiring to technological transcendence of the flesh but an expression of a radical immanence that is deeply embedded in the web of life itself: it is about 'becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine' (Braidotti, 2013, 66).

Whether or not this is expressed in explicitly spiritual or religious terms, the re-enchantment of the earth as suffused with the presence of the cosmic goddess serves to renders creation as sacred and irreducible to human appropriation. This may be conceived more in terms of a kind of ecological panentheism than any kind of traditional theism (Jantzen 1998); but it introduces a further 'more than human' horizon to the ecology of the (post)human: that of divinity, transcendence or the sacred.

The effect, then, of reclaiming the goddess in the context of critical posthumanism is to effect a move to a post-metaphysical theology in which the binaries of transcendent/immanent, sacred/secular, spiritual/material are deconstructed. In the process, the figure of the goddess challenges the heretical, patriarchal god and secular modernist understandings of material, embodied, and temporal existence as devoid of sacrality (Mantin, 2019, 19). Just as postsecularity challenges the ontological and epistemological separation of religion from the rest of our lived experience, so sacramentalism locates divinity, the sacred, and transcendence as a part of, not apart from, culture, technology, and ethics.

If there is no need to place cyborgs and goddesses on opposite sides of a material/metaphysical ontology, then the way is clear to consider their affinities rather than their differences. Ruth Mantin has suggested that, far from inhabiting separate universes, goddess and cyborg share similar monstrous, hybrid, and transgressive ontologies (Mantin,

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[5] See also Haraway, 2004a, 48-52.

2019, 11-12). Both challenge the ontological hygiene of humanity-nature-technology; and both demonstrate the epiphanic potential of posthuman and divine 'others' to subvert reductionist accounts of those same categories.

Just as critical posthumanism points to the artifice of human identity in relation to nature, culture, and technology, so the return of religion to the cultural imaginary requires us to reconsider the shifting fault-lines of dis/enchantment. The postsecular represents an opportunity to rethink those binaries and, like critical posthumanism, to conceive of human personhood and community beyond the categories imposed by secular modernity. If the posthuman alerts us to the contingency of the boundaries by which we separate the human from the non-human, the technological from the biological, artificial from natural, then the postsecular questions the fixity of the boundary between science and religion, profane and sacred and modernity's evacuation of faith from accepted conventions of public and moral reasoning.

By adopting a postsecular perspective, then, we can read Haraway's iconic statement as a way of rejecting Western modernist traditions of divine transcendence that divide the spiritual from the material—including the discourse of secularism—in favour of a future which acknowledges the affinities between the 'human, non-human, and more-than-human' (Graham, 2016, 69). In the context of the re-enchanted realms of technology, nature and cosmos it provides a renewed theological anthropology and ecology for the pursuit of a more integrated and sustainable vision of planetary living.

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